International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings

2018: Re-Imagine the Re-Newable

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Sara Jablon-Roberts
Johnson & Wales University, sara.jablon@jwu.edu

Diane McCrohan
Johnson & Wales University, diane.mccrohan@jwu.edu

Amrut Sadachar
Auburn University, azs0143@auburn.edu

Assessment of peer presentations as an instructional tool in an introductory fashion course

Sara Jablon-Roberts and Diane McCrohan, Johnson & Wales University, USA
Amrut Sadachar, Auburn University, USA

Keywords: Student presentations, fashion designers, learning objectives, undergraduate

Introduction: At a private Northeastern teaching university, the learning objectives for an introductory undergraduate fashion course include "develop[ing] a knowledge of leading fashion designers and identify[ing] their historical contribution." Upon graduation, students in the fashion major are expected to be able to "apply major concepts, skills, and values related to … designer contributions," reflecting this knowledge as a key marker of professional competence.

To help students recognize designers and understand their significance, instructors of two concurrent sections of the aforementioned course devised a learning activity utilizing peer presentations, which students in science-based disciplines have recognized as an effective tool in learning and retaining knowledge (Davey, 2012; Sullivan, 2008). In this instance, pairs of students were assigned an influential fashion designer to research. The pairs developed a short oral and visual presentation, which they delivered to the class. Pre- and posttests asking about familiarity with these designers permitted the assessment of the impact that peer presentations had on student perceptions of their knowledge. The purpose of this study is to determine whether and how student knowledge of influential fashion designers changed in response to peer presentations and if students valued this method of learning.

Method: A questionnaire was developed to evaluate student familiarity with influential designers. Designers were selected based on a list of the "Top 100 Apparel Designers" in the course's textbook (Stone, 2012). The questionnaire consisted of 7-point Likert-type scale (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree) items, with two items for each designer (e.g., "I am familiar with Oscar de la Renta" and "I can identify Oscar de la Renta's contributions to fashion."). Students were asked demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, and class level), as well as two open-ended questions: "Why do you think knowing about fashion designers is important?" and "Please share any other thoughts you have about this subject." Data collection was conducted via Qualtrics software, with a pretest link sent to every student enrolled in the course before students began researching their assigned designers. The posttest questionnaire was identical except for two additional questions about the efficacy of the teaching technique, with the link sent to students at the end of the course. Quantitative data was analyzed using a paired sample *t*-test in SPSS. For the qualitative data, two researchers coded the data together

until consensus was achieved. To identify themes, the researchers employed the constant comparative method throughout the coding process.

Results: Of the 73 students enrolled in the two sections of the course, 63 completed the pretest and 47 completed the posttest, for a response rate of 86% and 64%, respectively. Forty-four students took both the pre- and posttest survey. The majority of students responding to each questionnaire was female (90%, 94% respectively) and first-year students (78%, 81% respectively), figures that are in line with the characteristics of the course populations, of which 88% were female and 81% were first-years. Because of different class sizes, one section of the course reviewed 21 designers and other reviewed 16 designers. A total of 14 designers were reviewed in both classes and were considered for analyzing the pre-and posttest data.

Through paired sample *t*-test and based on pre- and posttest responses, there is strong evidence ($t = 15.04$, $p = .000$) that peer presentations as an instructional tool improved student recognition of designers and their contributions. Analysis showed an increase in the means of approximately 2 points (i.e., pretest mean = 4.30; posttest mean = 6.23). Thus, overall students' perceptions of their knowledge of influential fashion designers improved significantly from pretest to posttest.

These results were supported by the qualitative data. Before presentations, students reported "that for many of the designers, I could not identify their design if it was put in front of me." However, after presentations, students noted that they could now see how the contributions of these designers influenced not only current trends, but the state of the entire fashion industry. Overwhelmingly, students appreciated that "the peer presentations helped a lot and making my own helped me understand these people better," a finding that supports research conducted in other fields (Davey, 2012; Sullivan, 2008). Students called the presentations "fun" and "really interesting." One commented that this was a "good way of learning the designers. It would have been stressful learning about them all at once," even though that is precisely what happened.

Conclusion: Based on quantitative and qualitative data, peer presentations were considered an effective pedagogical technique in teaching fashion-related content. This learning activity could be a valuable tool for communicating large amounts of content in a variety of courses.

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